DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 343 003 CE 060 637

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TITLE Basic Skills Research: Implications for JTPA.
INSTITUTION Education and Training Corp., Staunton, VA.
SPONS AGENCY Employment and Training Administration (DOL), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Feb 92
CONTRACT 99-1-3604-98-003-02
NOTE 21p.
AVAILABLE FROM Education and Training Corporation, 103 East Beverley Street, P.O. Box 1388, Staunton, VA 24401 ($5.00).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; Employment Patterns; Job Training; Labor Force Development; Labor Turnover; Mathematics Skills; Problem Solving; Reading Skills; Research and Development; *Skill Development; Theory Practice Relationship; Training Methods; *Transfer of Training; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Job Training Partnership Act 1982; Workplace Literacy

ABSTRACT

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and the U.S. Congress have improved the quality, effectiveness, and integrity of the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA). A basic skills improvement program funded by the DOL was implemented in two Shenandoah Valley, Virginia, worksites. Several implications for managing the changes within JTPA related specifically to basic skills and program content. Four findings emerged from the project: (1) training curriculum designed around the context of the employee's job reinforced the transfer of learned skills to the job (functional context learning); (2) essential skills in both worksites included reading, writing, math, communication, and problem solving; (3) the American Society for Training and Development's "Workplace Basics" became a comprehensive employee development system including training and nontraining solutions--successful skills development required that organizational materials, job training, policies/procedures, and workflow information be developed; and (4) the relationship between needs, performance, skills, and results is not clearly understood in the workplace--attempts to provide evidence of how training influences an organization require accurate assessment and understanding of the relationship. JTPA must ensure that its structure, attitude, and policies enhance the long-term employability of its clients. (15 references) (NLA)

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BASIC SKILLS RESEARCH: IMPLICATIONS FOR JTPA

by

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February, 1992

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This project was conducted under Grant No. 99-1-3604-98-003-02 from the Employment and Training Administration, U.S. Department of Labor, under the authority of Title IV, Part D, of the Job Training Partnership Act of 1982. Grantees undertaking such projects under Government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their professional judgement. Therefore, points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent the official position or policy of the Department of Labor.

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The Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) originated in 1982 as an effort to improve the national second chance employment and training system, formerly governed by the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). By eliminating costly public work experience, emphasizing training-related placement, and establishing financial incentives for program outcomes (through performance-based contracting), this transition from CETA to JTPA has often been described as replacing an income maintenance program with a training and placement program ("Job Training Partnership Act [Senate Report 97-469]).

Since the late 1980's, government studies have led to numerous concerns about the quality and integrity of JTPA programs around the country. These reports indicate that racial discrimination, "creaming" (enrolling the most skilled applicants), inadequate assessment, training, and financial support, and low-quality job placements are common among a significant number of JTPA programs (Employment and Training Administration, 1991; "Carnegie Urges Services, 1991). Furthermore, there is evidence that performance-based contracting may result in excessive profits, inappropriate use of profits and, in the case of step-payment contracts, failure to meet expected outcomes ("USDOL Published Guidance," 1989; "Job Training Partnership Act," 1989).

In light of these reports, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and the U.S. Congress have taken steps to improve the quality, effectiveness and integrity of JTPA. For example, DOL

established new federal performance standards and minimum enrollment standards for States, emphasizing long-term employment and high wages for adults, basic skill improvement for youth, and increased enrollments of typically hard-to-serve clients (SRI International & Berkley Associates, 1990). In addition, DOL specified that all performance-based single unit fee programs must include a minimum of "core-training" (defined as either occupationally specific or remedial skills training), eliminate subcontracting for training and justify the cost of training in the written contract (J.E. Price, Memorandum, August, 1990).

Congressional amendments to support DOL's new direction are likely to pass in 1992. Because many of the amendments directly affect performance-based contracting, and because a substantial number of SDA's rely on performance-based agreements as their principal method of contracting for services ("Job Training Partnership Act," 1989), any resulting changes are likely to significantly alter the design of today's employment and training system. To ensure that the new look of JTPA will be consistent with today's employment needs, it is imperative that JTPA administrators critically evaluate their proposals in light of current research regarding the training needs of the modern workplace.

Through a one year research project funded by U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Education and Training Corporation (ETC) implemented a basic skills improvement program in two worksites in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Both programs

were based on the Workplace Basics Training Manual (Carnevale, A.P., Gainer, L.J., & Meltzer, A.S., 1990b), a guide for businesses in developing a worker skill improvement system tied to company goals and performance. Supplemental material for program development included the Training Manual's companion piece, Workplce Basics: The Skills Employers Want (Carnevale, et al., 1990a). Both publications were studied and evaluated for their usefulness in a real work setting.

As presented in Beyond Training: A Field Test of the American Society for Training and Development's Workplace Basics (Foucar-Szocki, 1992), ETC's research findings regarding the ASTD materials have several implications for managing the changes within JTPA. Some findings relate specifically to basic skills and program content. Others address overall management of the system. In this paper, each relevant finding is stated and followed by a discussion of the implications.

Implications for JTPA were derived from an examination of ETC's findings in relation to current professional perspectives on the success of JTPA programs. These perspectives were obtained through a variety of resources. Methods included personal interviews with nine JTPA professionals from diverse geographical regions, a review of employment and training periodicals, books, reports and policy statements, a review of portions of the written JTPA legislation, and reflection on the writer's personal experience with JTPA and the Workplace Basics material. Resources, except for interviews, are referenced in the bibliography.

FINDING #1: Training curriculum designed around the context of the employee's job, where "context" refers to both job-specific tasks and the work environment, reinforced the transfer of learned skills to the job. Successful contextually-based curriculum included real work examples and was delivered in a manner reflective of the culture, structure and routines of the workplace and its employees. This approach to training is an example of functional context learning, a primary principle in the Workplace Basics material.

In one sense, this finding supports the notion of integrated basic skill and occupational skill training for JTPA participants. Integration means that participants develop basic skills as they learn work-specific material. For example, a participant may improve math skills as s/he learns how to calculate the amount of carpet needed to cover a floor, or the total number of cups required in doubling a recipe. Integration is different than the traditional JTPA basic skill instruction where the learning of math, reading, writing or other basic skills is the intended outcome, or is applied exclusively toward the attainment of the GED or other qualifying assessment.

Other sources have supported integrated skill training within JTPA. The Employment and Training Administration (1991) recommends that preference be given to programs that offer integrated skill training. DOL recommends that "job trainers should put remedial education in a vocational context to aid nearly a quarter of their participants who may be learning disabled.... For instance, basic reading, writing and math instruction could include practice in filling out forms, learning to follow written directions, interpreting a transportation

schedule and comprehending bank statements" ("Merge Basic Skills," 1991, p.3). And, one JTPA service provider has considered replacing individualized GED instruction with integrated training. Her belief is that a carefully planned integrated program will not only develop work specific skills, but indirectly increase the acquisition of skills necessary to earn the GED.

This finding also suggests that a thorough skill analysis of a particular job includes analysis of both job task requirements and workplace environmental requirements. For example, ETC found that requirements for math, reading and writing were identified through analysis of routine job tasks (narrow context). However, examination of the broader context of the job revealed a need for communication, problem-solving, teamwork skills and leadership skills. These skills were discernable only in examination of employees' contributions to the Total Quality program and participation in job rotation or new employee training. This broader context includes the design of work, the nature of the work environment, and management practices which "determine the scope of a Workplace Basics program, i.e., what skills will be acknowledged and what skills will not" (Foucar-Szocki, 1992, p. 7). Meaningful integrated JTPA training programs must include basic skills training for both the narrow and broad context of an occupation.

FINDING #2: Essential skills in both worksites included reading, writing, math, communication and problem-solving. Communication and problem-solving were the most basic. Sites determined which basic skills were important and how they were used. Leadership, teamwork and understanding work systems were important in the self-management/high employee-involvement facility, but not as evident in the more traditional environment. Furthermore, in one site, communication was seen primarily as creating opportunities for employees to get and give information. In the other site, communication was seen as a key component of work.

While a wide range of skills has been included in Workplace Basics: The Skills Employers Want (Carnevale, et al., 1990b), ETC found a need in the project worksites for only some of the 16 skills listed in the model (Foucar-Szocki, 1992). Each worksite required a unique set of skills and used those skills in a manner different from the other worksite. Other Virginia employers report that technical skills, computer skills, interpersonal skills, dependability, honesty and a cooperative attitude are critical requirements for performance in their facilities (Martin and Tolson, 1989). The context of the work environment determines which skills are necessary for performance.

As the context of the work environment determines which skills are necessary for job performance, the context of the JTPA client should determine which services are necessary for successful employability development. The potential worksite in a particular locality is one part of this context. The context also includes a client's social and psychological environments, aspects which often present more of a barrier to employment than a lack of occupational skills.

For example, a majority of JTPA participants either do not

have or are unable to articulate clear career goals. As one service provider stated, many participants experience career confusion and may, in the midst of training, decide another vocation is more suitable. Furthermore, many participants must solve family problems, develop positive work and hygiene habits, and address psychological/emotional issues prior to successful employment. Training in how to solve these types of problems may be more beneficial and have longer-term effects than training in specific occupational skills.

Core training for JTPA is currently defined as "either occupational training, or basic skills/remediation training, or both" ("Job Training Partnership Act," 1989, p. 10462). Training in either area is acceptable to DOL as long as it is "designed to lead to placement in an occupational target." According to recently issued Labor policy, at least 50% of a participant's program enrollment time must be spent in core training.

Neither occupational nor basic skills training is clearly defined in the written sources reviewed for this paper. The most relevant reference is the definition for basic education skills under the youth competency policy. This definition states that basic education skills are "reading comprehension, math computation, writing, speaking, listening, problem-solving, reasoning, and the capacity to use these skills in the workplace" ("PIC Recognized Competencies," 1990, p. 527).

Depending on States' and SDA's interpretations of the term core training, a lack of clear definition from DOL may be

beneficial or detrimental to JTPA participants and local employers. A broad interpretation may mean that participants receive training in a wide variety of "hard" and "soft" skills, as long as the skills are recognized as necessary for job performance. Conversely, a narrow interpretation may lead to a narrow "hard skill" focused design, in which participants have few opportunities to develop adequate communication, interpersonal or problem-solving/decision making skills. Employers who value hard and soft skills equally may be less satisfied with the JTPA product.

While JTPA is currently under revision, DOL has a perfect opportunity to clarify and, if necessary, expand its definition of core training. A broad definition of core training allows programs to be responsive to the broad context of the client. Core training options must include training in a diverse selection of basic skills: reading, writing, math, interpersonal skills, problem-solving, decision-making, creativity, career development, teamwork, leadership, organizational effectiveness, and any other necessary skills. Furthermore it must be recognized that skill development occurs through a variety of methods. In addition to traditional classroom training, skill development methods include educative counseling, independent study and group problem solving. The participant's context-- goals, current skill profile, and the potential employer's skill requirements-- must determine which skills are developed and in what way they are developed.

Core training must provide the participant a foundation of skills appropriate for any occupational area. This is especially true for participants who simply need experience in the work world. Furthermore, skill training that is applicable to a wide variety of job areas may be more acceptable to the employer. As one service provider described, many employers are more interested in an employee's ability to "be there when he or she is supposed to be there" than to come equipped with any specific occupational skill. Why? Because their jobs will change.

FINDING #3: Workplace Basics became a comprehensive employee development system including training and non-training solutions. In addition to employment training, successful skills development required that organizational materials, including job information, job training and workflow information be developed. Clarification of policies and procedures within the worksites was also important.

The purpose of a strong employment and training system is to meet participant employment goals. Policies and other structural aspects of the system must allow programs to address occupational training needs and participants' various social, psychological and situational circumstances that present barriers to employment. At the same time, service providers must meet program goals to ensure program accountability and public support. The challenge is to achieve a balance between the two.

POLICIES

JTPA professionals recognize that some of DOL's recently issued policy guidelines help maintain public support for JTPA and are designed to address the various problems within the system. However, some professionals expressed the opinion that those same policies inadvertently prevent JTPA programs from meeting the varied needs of their customers. Three guidelines were consistently addressed. First, DOL's policy that performance-based single-unit fee contractors must provide all training (J.E. Price, Memorandum, August, 1990) greatly limits the range of occupational opportunities for many JTPA participants. As one SDA administrator said, this policy has ruled out a majority of the training available through his local vocational-technical centers and other training facilities.

Secondly, the new policy that at least 50% of a participant's training must be occupational-specific core training (J.E. Price) assumes that all participants in all localities need this type of training to obtain meaningful employment. As previously cited examples indicate, this may be a faulty assumption.

A third problematic policy regards the requirement that only training specific placement can result in payment to single-unit fee performance-based contractors (J.E. Price). While this policy is understood politically, it does inhibit service providers from responding to a participant's change regarding a previous vocational choice. One service provider explained that

participants are sometimes discouraged from accepting a job outside of the training-related field, even if the compensation is greater or the job offers more compatible circumstances. This practice may decrease participant job satisfaction and, consequently, job retention. In contrast, earlier JTPA policies allowed "more room to move with what the participant needed . . . We listened more and responded more to what they wanted after they were enrolled. Now we do a lot of coaching to keep them where they are."

STRUCTURE, KNOWLEDGE AND TRAINING

Several of the professionals interviewed for this paper indicated that in addition to inhibitive Labor policies, the current JTPA structure, employers' lack of knowledge and inadequate staff training are in dire need of attention. According to a national JTPA representative, ineffective communication and an inadequate infrastructure within the JTPA system prevent SDAs from developing the most effective programs possible. Few PICs are well informed or understand the JTPA law, and fail to effectively marshall the business resources within the community. On a national level, there is too little coordination, too many conflicting rules, and "not enough sharing of information".

One of the most critical problems is employers lack of knowledge and understanding in how to "make it possible for workers to learn new skills and use new skills" (Interviewed

Source). ETC found that "employees and management did not fully understand the relationship of skills to performance, and did not have measures that would reflect performance improvement as a result of skill development" (Foucar-Szocki, 1992, P. 39). Development of meaningful skill development activities required clarification of job expectations, relationships between people and departments and policies and procedures. Without this understanding, skill development was counterproductive if workers had little or no opportunity to use the learned skills.

Until management learns more effective ways to use and develop worker skills, the hardest-to-serve JTPA population may never experience successful job performance nor achieve long-term self sufficiency. One state JTPA administrator suggests that JTPA service providers have the opportunity to assist employers in building these skills through job development, design of OJT contracts and skill training curricula, and job placement followup. However, JTPA staff are not currently equipped to take optimal advantage of these opportunities. As one JTPA consultant stated (summarizing a recently study on JTPA),

> a miniscule amount of money is earmarked for staff training . . . front line staff are rarely trained. Where training is funded, it tends to be for administrative and legal type things. Many states make no effort at all to train. Even if you have people on the job for a long time, they aren't growing . . . they aren't learning new skills and new ways to do their jobs.

FINDING #4: The relationship between needs, performance, skills and results is not clearly understood in the workplace. Attempts to provide evidence of how training influences an organization requires accurate assessment and understanding of this relationship. Accurate assessment and understanding requires a technical expertise.

While the purpose of JTPA is not to correct a company's specific performance problem, training should improve the skills that will positively contribute to company performance. Without a clear understanding of the relationship between skills and performance, a JTPA program is less likely to provide the most appropriate skill training opportunities.

ETC found that basic skills are difficult to describe; they appear to take on meaning and utility only within a context (Foucar-Szocki, 1992). Effective skill development requires that company needs be translated into a skills framework. An accurate assessment of the context of the work environment, job tasks for a specific occupation, and the skills required for successful performance must occur. Activities that promote skill development in the required areas must be designed and delivered.

Effective job developers, training designers and training facilitators understand the relationship between company needs and worker skills. Moreover, those who have the ability to assess and evaluate the participant's current skill portfolio and articulate what skills must be improved and obtained, make informed referral decisions and contribute to job retention percentages. A meaningful employability development plan, job placement, OJT contract, followup contact (with the employer and

the participant) or training session is based on the ability to translate needs into skills. Additional skills required to effectively accomplish staff tasks are effective communication and interpersonal skills, time management skills, creativity, motivation and an ability to understand systems.

If JTPA continues to pursue a more complex, integrated approach to employment readiness, a well equipped staff to implement a more sophisticated program is required. Professional and meaningful staff skill development, based on the relationship between performance improvement goals and staff needs is critical.

CONCLUSION

Some DOL policies regarding performance-based contracting prevent some JTPA programs from meeting the context of the individual, generalize program services, and force service providers to focus on meeting process requirements. Failure to fit program services to the various contexts of the JTPA client may produce spurious negative results. Participants may not develop the skills that are needed for the particular locality in which they live or work. Furthermore, they have little opportunity to develop the basic life skills necessary for self-sufficiency.

Generalized programming may narrow the opportunities for business representatives to contribute their local expertise. Without this resource, training programs are less likely to

reflect the context of today's rapidly changing workplace and will fail to meet the needs of the local employer. As a result, the potential for strengthening private-public partnerships is weakened. According to Smith and Trist (1988), "such linkages can enhance economic productivity and also provide better job opportunities for traditionally disadvantaged groups" (p. 41).

And third, a process-focused training system may limit a program's ability to meet performance expectations. For example, one service provider has experienced a significant drop in the numbers of participants employed in the 13th week followup period. It is her opinion that a decrease in retention is a direct result of the regulation that performance-based single unit fees are earned only for training-related placements (Interviewed Source). Because of this rule, employment coordinators encourage participants to accept a training-related job, despite the fact that some may have experienced a change in vocational interest. Participants who experience a change in vocational interest, but are encouraged to accept a job in the training-related field are less likely to stay employed in that job.

The JTPA system must take steps to ensure that its structure, attitude and policies enhance the long term employability of its clients, and do not prevent it. First, JTPA professionals on all levels must create and take advantage of opportunities to educate themselves and the business community on the issues related to second chance employment and training.

They must continue to pursue the development of training institutes and other vehicles for JTPA staff training, create opportunities to consistently network with one another and employers, and develop methods through which employers can discuss performance improvement systems. SDAs must effectively marshall the community's business resources through meaningful involvement in the PIC and must take time to educate PIC members on the structure of and possibilities within JTPA. JTPA staff and business representatives must seek opportunities for collaborative research which foster productive relationships and produce important data on which to base program design and performance expectations.

Second, service providers can assist employers in developing effective skill development and maintenance programs for their companies to expand job opportunities for less-skilled workers. To accomplish this, employment coordinators and trainers must learn how to interpret workplace systems and help employers understand how their systems enhance or prevent worker skill development and maintenance.

Third, JTPA staff training must include topics other than "How to Complete This Form." Instead, training must help staff understand the causes of unemployment and offer new ways that JTPA can address those causes. Training must provide opportunities for staff to learn and practice the skills necessary for effective performance. Service providers must take every opportunity to learn about the local employment situation,

local economic development plans and local training and employment needs. As a national JTPA representative stated, "JTPA can play a neat role in helping build a more prepared workforce at the local level. The key is to not have JTPA and its contractors operating in isolation from the community."

Finally, a strategy to improve the quality of the JTPA system must include a campaign to foster professionalism and trust within the system, develop a clear understanding of the ultimate purpose of JTPA, and initiate a serious attempt to design system management based on meaningful assessments of client needs, not taxpayer needs. Participant training must be a meaningful educational resource, applicable to diverse vocational areas. SDAs and service providers must have access to a menu of training options that address occupational skills, basic skills and life skills. Service providers must have the flexibility to design employability development plans that meet the needs of the participant, not the JTPA system.

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